3: Creel H-4 (no date) 1988
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

Baynard in a letter dated the same day as Pope's. Sealy expressed hope that "the people" had profited from the missionary's presence, but he "could see nothing of it." Sealy, like Pope, withheld consent for the missionary's coming within the confines of his plantation.[25] Denominational rivalry may have been a factor in decisions to deny Methodists access to the slaves, and Baptists expressed the most skepticism toward missionaries. But more significantly, the Methodist-Baptist controversy provides insight into religious activity among the slaves prior to the missionaries' coming.

Thomas Turpin, assigned to the May and New River Mission in 1833, had his own opinions about the state of religion in the Sea Islands, and defended himself regarding his unsuccessful efforts among the bondspeople. Turpin had access to about 1,000 adult slaves, one third of whom were in the Baptist church and in the "Negro societies, and all of them under Baptist influence." Yet these slaves rarely saw the pastor of the church or attended its services. Instead, Turpin related, the slaves had "societies organized among themselves." According to the missionary, "these societies were very corrupt." Turpin described a scene at one black society gathering on Bull's Island in which a particular type of penance, drawn from African traditions, was engaged in as punishment for sin:

> They had three degrees of punishment, and . . . the punishment was inflicted agreeably to the magnitude of the crime, according to their view of the crime. If the crime was of the first magnitude, the perpetrator had to pick up a quart of benne seed . . . poured on the ground by the priest; and if of the second, a quart of rice; and if of the third a quart of corn; . . . they also had high seats and low seats, but incorrect views relative to those who ought to be punished; . . . it was also a rule among them never to divulge the secret of stealing: and if it should be divulged . . . that one had to go on the low seat or pick up the benne seed.[26]

The rite the slaves engaged in is reminiscent of high-low seats and a pyramid of degrees in the Poro and Sande in Upper Guinea, and some secret societies in Angola. The Poro inner circle was a social regulating as well as religious body. It stopped quarrels, caught, tried, condemned, and punished social criminals. In Poro-Sande culture, high seats belonged to a few old religious leaders of high degree.[27] But the way Gullahs employed the use of high-low degrees was unique and reflected their ability to adapt a past tradition to the organization of their slave community. The association of the communal and the spiritual is evident,

3: Creel H-4 (no date) 1988
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

17
681
567
797
673

since this regulation took place within a religious context, ostensibly under the rubric of Christianity. High and low seats in Gullah society assumed a meaning different from African Poro-Sande society. But the function of regulation and community control was still present. The Gullahs reserved the "low seat" for those who betrayed community interests by divulging "the secret of stealing," undoubtedly from the master. This demonstrates the seriousness of solidarity among the people. Thus picking up the benne seed was reserved for the worst of crimes "according to their view of the crime." While the Methodist missionary believed the slaves had incorrect ideas about who should be punished, slaves themselves were using an internal logic with little reference to Protestant conceptions of sin. This Gullah interpretation of sin was at variance with their Christian instruction. A sense of contrition for the safety and peace of the plantation or out of fear of the Christian God was not a motivating issue. For the Gullahs, moral guilt fell on those who forsook socioreligious authority and loyalty in the slave quarters. The presence and influence of black leadership was also revealed as the "punishments" were administered by a "priest." This implies no relationship to the Christian church to which some of the slaves belonged. Missionary Turpin believed the rites strangely akin to Catholicism. Obviously they were not. But in West Africa Poro-Sande priests and priestesses were responsible for administering justice and punishment. Thus this role had some cultural-historical continuity. Slaves saw nothing incongruous about adopting elements of Christian religion and adapting those to aspects of their traditional spiritual heritage still serviceable in the New World setting.

The penance for the "sin" of divulging the secret of stealing was no brief activity, but a rather trying feat. A "gentleman" residing on Bull's Island informed Turpin that an individual usually could not pick up all the scattered benne seeds in one night. And "if it was not done in one night they had to continue until they did it." Thus while the benne seed ritual was not comparable in degree to African punishments instituted by the Poro Council for community crimes, there is a symbolic reference. While representing a form of censure for erring members, it was not the way "Christianized" slaves were expected to interpret the concept of "sin." Turpin stated in his report that having to contend with "all this superstition and ignorance, together with their prejudices against Methodism," he had added few church members. Nor, reported Turpin,

3: Creel H-4 (no date) 1988
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

did he strive to do so, "but rather . . . to beat down their prejudices and to establish a better principle of religion among them, all of which I should not presume any person in this low country would attempt to contradict."[28]

Planters in the May and New River Mission region were offended by statements implying that they tolerated practices such as the one Turpin discussed. Sea Island Baptists felt under attack for not instructing black converts in "true" principles of Christianity and for baptizing slaves without scrutinizing their religious life. Turpin was smarting from the cold reception he received from planters. Turpin did in fact infer that some planters were aware of and permitted un-Christian practices among slaves baptized as Baptists. It was after all a "gentleman" of the Island who had explained to Turpin the workings of the benne seed penance he had observed. Methodist unpopularity among Sea Island planters was recognized at the Missionary Society Headquarters. Soon after the report was circulated, Turpin was removed from the May and New River Mission, and assigned to the John and Wadmalaw Islands Mission in the Charleston District. Turpin insisted, however, that he did not intend to discredit the planters. Nor, he said, did he mean that planters knowingly sanctioned "corrupt" practices among the slaves. Turpin merely wished to point out how irreligious so-called converted slaves were. Through the pages of the *Southern Christian Advocate*, he made a somewhat cynical apology, which undoubtedly did little to assuage the ire of Sea Island planters:

> But it [the report] appears to have injured the feelings of many of the Baptist friends. I did not intend to injure their feelings, nor any other persons, notwithstanding though, it has been said that I have "shot a ball particularly at the Baptists, and in its glance it was hit the Episcopalians." If it has made any mortal wound by its being received in a light different from what I intended, I feel it my duty to heal the wound.[29]

Turpin had indeed offended the planters, especially his comments on the slaves' lack of "truly religious" training, despite Baptist church membership. He believed that the "converted" slaves made a mockery of Christianity. These slaves who "scarcely ever saw the pastor" of their church were members of the First African Church in Savannah. Andrew Bryan's nephew, Andrew Marshall, was the pastor. In 1830, church membership was 2,417. Although a black church, whites were responsible for control and for the conduct of its members. Whites came to the

3: Creel H-4 (no date) 1988
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

"guilty." Theft, for instance, brought many Gullahs before disciplinary tribunals. Of course slaves did steal for consumptive purposes, obviously because provisions were often insufficient and monotonous. To keep cotton at maximum yield, planters sacrificed cultivation of food staples for their workers. Provision acreage was not determined by the slave community's size, but by the numbers of food-acres workers could attend while working cotton. Sam Mitchell, a former bondsman on one of John Chaplin's Ladies Island plantations, considered his master one of the more tolerable slaveholders. Yet Mitchell recalled that slaves received only a weekly peck of corn except at potato-digging time when they also received potatoes. Sam Polite, of John Fripp's plantation on St. Helena Island, also remembered a grim picture of subsistence:

> On Sattiday night every slabe dat wuks gits peck of corn and pea, and sometimes meat and clabber. You nebber see any sugar, neider coffee in slabery. You has straw in your mattress but dey gib you blanket. Ebery year in Christmas month you gits fur or eider fibe yaa'd cloth. . . . You wears hit winter en summer, Sunday en ebery day. You don't git no coat."

Understandably, Gullahs felt no particular bond toward a "Thou shalt not steal" edict despite supposed spiritual and assured physical reprisals. Certainly the Gullahs realized the sham of such dictates given their peculiar circumstances and oppression. Still Gullahs were not immoral on the subject of theft. Among themselves they took a serious attitude toward theft, considering it a breach of trust. Yet Gullahs felt no compunction about such acts directed toward the slave system. In the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission Interviews, conducted in 1863, Robert Smalls and Harry McMillan, two soldiers, Sea Island residents and former bondsmen, explained the slaves' attitude toward theft. They testified that while the majority of Gullahs stole from their masters and deceived them, these slaves would not steal from each other and were truthful in their dealings with one another. During the Civil War a white officer of the First South Carolina Volunteers told Charlotte Forten, a black Northerner, that he never saw a regiment where men were so honest. "In many camps the colonel and the rest of us would find it necessary to place a guard before our tents. We never do it here," he said. "They are left entirely unguarded. Yet nothing has ever been touched." Similarly, Laura M. Towne wrote in her diary: "The men and women come crowding here at all times begging to be allowed to buy clothing,

3: Creel H-4 (no date) 1988
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

and though they stand about for hours in the sun, we have never missed the slightest thing."[56]

In the benne seed ritual, Gullahs dealt with theft in a spiritual context, under the guise of the Baptist faith. But the moral judgment was the opposite of Christianity. "Sin" was not upon the slave who stole from the master, but the individual who "divulged" the act. Gullahs possessed a keen sense of communal morality which, in this regard, was not subverted by dogmatic features of Christianity. While stealing from "Maussa," was a sin, it was wrong—that is, against elements of collective interests and values—to steal from a fellow slave and hence betray community confidence. Gullahs extended their moral philosophy further than race or condition however, by refusing to steal from whites simply because they were white. But, the Gullahs were not naive. Their shrewd analysis of justice helped them distinguish between friend and oppressor even among white Northern "missionaries." And some white Northern Baptist ministers sent to the Sea Islands during the Port Royal experiment were more avaricious than cotton agents. One Reverend Phillips, on full salary from a missionary organization, also drew a salary from the government as a superintendant of plantations, and was provided with "house-rent and rations." Still, Phillips "demanded," from St. Helena Island Gullahs, "half-a-dollar from every church member for the half year ending January 1." Since some one thousand blacks on St. Helena, claimed membership in Brick Baptist Church, Phillips expected to collect quite a sum. But the Gullahs refused to pay. Other ministers "of like kidney" were dismissed for "lying" and for "stealing" contributions sent to the Gullahs by Northern congregations. On one occasion, Gullahs discovered that James McCrea, a minister representing the American Missionary Association was cheating them. They refused to attend McCrea's religious meetings and refused to labor in the cotton fields he supervised. Likewise, when some government cotton agents on St. Helena charged over 100 percent more for store items than was being charged in Beaufort, these stores were broken into "and robbed of a good deal of clothing."[57]

Flight, another problem continually plaguing Sea Island slaveholders and punished by both church and state, was usually provoked by some extreme act of cruelty, or gross injustice. Sometimes slaves left because of a strong desire to visit a loved one. Gullahs rarely ran away with intentions of "going North" for instance. Aside from the near impossi-